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# SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

Race Relations in the AAF  
During World War II

Alan M. Osur



AIR  
FORCE  
*History*  
*and*  
*Museums*  
PROGRAM



Above: Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., Commanding Officer, 99th Fighter Squadron posed with the first pilots to be assigned to the unit. First African American pilots to be assigned to a fighter squadron. USAF Photo.

On cover: P-51 Mustangs of the 332d Fighter Group. USAF Photo





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## Introduction

Race relations between white and black Americans in the Army Air Forces (AAF) during World War II ran the gamut from harmonious to hostile, depending upon the unique circumstances existing within each unit, command, and theater. In analyzing racial policy as it was implemented throughout the chain of command, are a number of themes relevant for an understanding of the utilization of African Americans during the war. First, the AAF never willingly accepted black soldiers. This service had totally excluded them for over two decades before they were permitted to enter, and then used them only reluctantly. The fact that the AAF even opened its doors to African Americans and proceeded to make additional opportunities available to them was due to pressures aimed at the War Department and the AAF. Individuals and organizations within the black community and white liberals in and out of Congress were quite vocal and were able to exert sufficient pressure to force the War Department and AAF to examine and modify their policies and practices throughout the war.

Another recurring theme was that leadership within the War Department and AAF assumed that segregation was the most efficient system of race relations and accepted the "separate-but-equal" doctrine. Even if we accept "separate-but-equal" as the law of the land, the AAF did not, in fact, maintain equal facilities for black soldiers, and they were not afforded equal treatment. Thus, the policy of segregation was unsatisfactory for African Americans, and the duplicated facilities that were necessary to maintain the system were far too expensive in terms of the results obtained. And because of deeply ingrained racist beliefs, the American public and the military were willing to accept the additional financial burden, social unrest, and inefficiency of segregation in an attempt to keep African Americans "in their place."

During the war, the U.S. military inherited from American society and from its own traditions a difficult problem in attempting to absorb large numbers of African Americans into a war apparatus, and racial issues plagued the AAF. Although the AAF fervently defended segregation, its leaders failed to understand that this implied second-class citizenship for blacks. Additionally, blacks were no longer willing to accept the demeaning status to which they had been relegated, and using the military as a vehicle for their protests, voiced their objection to discriminatory treatment and segregation. Their protests were for military leaders a constant source of frustration and annoyance.

However, one can discern a decided shift in the approach of the War Department in 1943. Until then, officials in the War Department and the AAF reflected society's traditional racist attitude toward the utilization of African Americans. The military did not consider black soldiers as part of

the American military tradition and used them only when absolutely necessary for the defense of the country or when political pressure forced their use. With mounting pressure upon War Department officials, there was change in outlook from 1943 through the end of the war to recognize and alleviate the race problem. The U.S. government sought to utilize black soldiers fairly rather than to view them merely as embarrassments and problems. Unfortunately, this change in attitude did not filter down through the AAF chain of command. Throughout the war, many AAF commanders demonstrated a reluctance to treat blacks with full equality and to show a sincere commitment to abide by positive War Department racial directives.

## **The War Department and the Black Community**

In spite of an exclusion policy maintained by the U.S. government and military, African Americans have participated in America's wars, although they have not always received due recognition for their efforts. With the approach of World War II, two contrasting attitudes affected War Department policy concerning the utilization of African Americans. On one side was the black community which pressured the President, as Commander in Chief, as well as the War Department. Because African Americans were determined to persevere in achieving the promise of American life, their impact during World War II differed from previous wars. They were aided by organizations within the black community and by the propaganda war which emphasized the racist and undemocratic character of the Axis powers. Their ability to organize and the political self-consciousness and awareness that had developed in the black community gave them the capability to exert pressure. What they worked for was recognition of their rights commensurate with their sacrifice to the national effort, and they expected that the federal government would protect them as all soldiers in uniform.

While African Americans at the outset of World War II became vocal about their rights within the military structure, others continued to defend the needs of that structure, such as the right of whites to be segregated from blacks and the military requirement for military efficiency. War Department leaders weighed these views as they attempted to formulate troop policy for blacks. They also weighed studies at, for example, the Army War College, that evaluated the performance of African Americans in World War I. One study from 1925 clearly reflected the racist views of American society and military personnel. It established the impact of racism upon the minds of field grade officers of the 1920s who, generally speaking, would become the commanders in World War II. Another study from mid-1937 noted that during mobilization, black soldiers would comprise nine percent of the total mobilized strength. But it recommended segregated units and did not list the Air Corps as an organization in which blacks could serve.

There were other factors that influenced World War II War Department officials and racial policy. The War Department viewed the racial situation as a product of American society and believed that the military should avoid becoming entangled in the country's social problems. The military should uphold the status quo without offering African Americans any concessions beyond those they had in civilian life. As General George C. Marshall noted in 1940, it was society that had created the conditions which made it necessary for the War Department to fol-

low a policy of segregation, and he felt that it was important not to ignore those conditions. An extensive campaign to force a change could have a destructive effect on military efficiency, and the military was not the proper vehicle for critical social experiments. He continued this reasoning in 1941 in a letter in which he argued against ending segregation which he saw as “tantamount to solving a social problem which has perplexed the American people throughout the history of the nation.” He maintained that “experiments within the Army in the solution of social problems are fraught with danger to efficiency, discipline, or morale.”

An officer of the War Department Adjutant General’s office gave a speech in late 1941 in which he noted that “the Army is not a sociological laboratory.... Experiments to meet the wishes and demands of the champions of every race and creed for the solution of their problems are a danger to efficiency, discipline and morale.” This speech characterizes the views of many within the department, including the leadership of the AAF.

The military plans and studies of the interwar period, the attitude of the white Americans, and the attitude of military leaders all accepted segregation as the most efficient approach for the utilization of African Americans. Since segregation was legal (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896), the military could fall back on the position that segregation was not discriminatory and was indeed the most efficient way to run the War Department. An AAF memorandum states that the AAF “can do a better job with less trouble by segregation than they can by intermingling the races with the problems which such intermingling are bound to cause.”

In sum, the War Department saw itself as a product of American society; therefore, Army racial policy should reflect civilian practice and black soldiers should receive no more than they had received in civilian life. The Army and AAF saw themselves as servants of the state, not as instruments of social change. They should operate in terms of military needs and efficiency, and their leaders firmly believed that military effectiveness and morale dictated segregation.

The black community viewed the military differently and by the end of the 1930s began to devote greater attention to the lack of opportunity in the military service. The military was a source of employment for many who continued to feel the effects of the great depression. The pay, food, and clothing provided by the military offered them an exceptional opportunity. To be denied the right to serve was interpreted by African Americans as an example of economic discrimination. Others became skeptical over the issue of having to “prove themselves” by fighting for the right to serve. They believed that they had clearly demonstrated their ability in other American wars. Also, the African American community fully understood that segregation implied inequality – second-class citizenship. Equally frustrating was the hypocrisy of the military segregation policy maintained during a war fought for the preservation of democracy,

as African Americans viewed segregation as the very antithesis of the American democratic system. African Americans were unrelenting in pointing out that the Four Freedoms and Jim Crow ideology were contradictory and that black Americans were fighting abroad for a democratic ideal that did not exist at home.

Disrespect for blacks in uniform became another source of difficulty for black servicemen. When large numbers entered the military, many soon encountered racial problems in and around their camps, obvious cases of discrimination and prejudice. But a further issue was herein implied – disrespect for the uniform of the United States military. All military men and women were regularly required to wear their uniforms and in American society the uniform normally commanded respect. However, numerous discriminatory acts were perpetrated against black soldiers, and these were serious injustices because the military institution was for them one of the few symbols of what America represented.

An important theme which grew out of the early war period was the slogan *Double V*. This rallying symbol, popularized in early 1942 by the Pittsburgh *Courier*, stood for victory against fascism abroad and racism at home. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also supported the concept. Throughout the war, African Americans, applying the concept of the *Double V*, struggled to remove the contradiction between the claims of American democratic ideology and the racial inequalities evident in American life. As Americans, they were patriotic and loyal, and expressed their support for the military buildup and war effort; but, at the same time, they were embittered over their treatment by the military and their inferior social status within American society.

In analyzing the racial issues affecting the black community, it is obvious that by 1942 a black consciousness had evolved and was an important factor in pressuring for social change. Black organizations had been pressuring the government for a greater role in the national defense, directing their efforts primarily at restrictions in the Army and Navy and the exclusion policy of the Air Corps. The Pittsburgh *Courier* was joined by the NAACP, and the National Urban League. The *Courier* made the Air Corps its special target. As the War Department announced that new openings would be made available to African Americans, the *Courier*, in particular, interpreted each victory as a direct result of its long fight. In May 1940, the *Courier* launched the Committee on Participation of Negroes in the National Defense Program. However, the *Courier* did not always receive the support of the NAACP, because the *Courier* was willing to accept the “practicality of separate divisions” while the NAACP was not.

In the fall of 1940, the black community and the War Department confronted each other, bringing about significant results. A meeting between Walter White of the NAACP and President Franklin Roosevelt



led to an administration policy statement that for the first time stated that African Americans would be utilized on a “fair and equitable basis” in each major branch of the service, including in the Air Corps. However, segregation also would be the policy. As the November election approached, blacks would make more gains, such as the appointment of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., to the rank of Brigadier General; Judge William Hastie as Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War to handle racial matters; and Major Campbell Johnson as Executive Assistant to the Director of Selective Service.

Pressure from the black community continued, and the NAACP conducted a letter-writing campaign to get the Air Corps to accept blacks. However, in January 1941 when the War Department announced the formation of an all-black Pursuit Squadron and the training of black pilots at Tuskegee, the NAACP and other black organizations were in a dilemma concerning the program. Although they were adamant about any kind of segregation, especially in the Army, they had to admit that Tuskegee was, nonetheless, an opportunity to fly in the Air Corps.

It is clear that the pervasiveness of traditional racial ideas held by the majority of the white American public and solidified by time and practice made the black struggle for equal rights arduous and lengthy. Blacks expressed in different ways the idea that they would not simply accept things as they were and were willing to fight for their right to participate in the military establishment. The War Department gradually altered its policies, accepting black soldiers and improving their treatment. The black community organized to meet this challenge and to fight for its rights — and when participation was achieved, it continued to fight for fair treatment.

## **The Army Air Forces: Early Policies and Practices**

During the period of the military buildup leading to World War II, leaders of the Army Air Forces hesitated to utilize African Americans. Air Corps officers believed that they were incapable of performing well in flying roles, and since military efficiency overshadowed all other considerations, the utilization of black men was deemed impractical. Primarily because the War Department received constant pressure from black organizations and individual and in turn the department pressed the Air Corps, were AAF units opened up to blacks. Thus, the black community and the War Department eroded the AAF exclusionist policy. Once the AAF accepted blacks into its ranks, local communities and military leaders protested having black soldiers stationed in their areas. But as a result of War Department pressure, the AAF was forced to deploy them to all of its stateside bases and to many overseas sites. Institutional and personal discrimination, however, persisted, and African Americans did not obtain fair and equitable treatment in the AAF. On the other hand, the AAF did establish an integrated AAF Officer Candidate School in Miami Beach, Florida.

During the First World War, official Air Service policy toward African Americans maintained that since “at present time no colored aero [sic] squadrons are being formed,” and it was impossible to mix blacks with whites, no black recruits could be accepted into the Air Service. Applicants were told that they could apply later if the Air Service decided to form black flying squadrons. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s such reasoning prevailed. In 1922, the Chief of the Training and War Plans Division noted that although “there is no restriction placed by law or regulation on the race of applicants for appointment as flying cadet,” it was impossible to form black or integrated units. There was, therefore, “no justification in training negro cadets.” The Air Service Reserve Corps also excluded African Americans, since that service would only accept those officers with previous Air Service training.

In the 1930s, the Air Corps’ rejection of blacks remained an institutionalized practice as black applicants time after time received the standard reply that “there are no organizations in the Army A.C. made up of colored men and none are contemplated.” Therefore, there are “no colored soldiers in the Army Air Corps.” One qualified young black applicant who was rejected during this period was Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1936.

Until 1939, the Air Corps had succeeded in excluding African Americans. However, black and white leaders and organizations were no longer willing to accept such racist practices and challenged this exclusion policy. Intensive political pressure was applied upon Congress, the

President, Secretary of War, and War Department, and through them, upon the Air Corps. Gradually the Air Corps altered its policies, backed down, and admitted blacks.

In 1939 and 1940, Congress enacted three laws which were to have a significant impact upon blacks and the AAF. The Civilian Pilot Training Act established the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) with the purpose of creating a reserve of civilian pilots to be called in the event of a war emergency. African Americans participated in this program at a number of sites, including Tuskegee Institute. Public Law 18 provided for the large-scale expansion of the Air Corps, and one section stipulated that one of the civilian contract schools had to be designated for the training of blacks. Since the contract schools were to provide pilots for the military, blacks assumed that they would enter the AAF, although the law did not explicitly state this. Yet, the AAF continued to exclude them for the next two years, and military leaders resisted and even refused to acknowledge the full implications of the law. The AAF Plans Division tried to circumvent the law by noting that while one school must be designated for blacks, no one actually had to be trained.

Finally in 1940, responding from pressures from black and civil rights groups, Congress inserted in the Selective Training and Service Act that there would be no discrimination because of "race and color." The act effectively required the War Department to accept blacks in numerical proportion to whites.

However, the Air Corps continued to resist the pressure placed upon it to accept blacks. African Americans applying for admission to the Glenview, Illinois school established by Public Law 18 were told "that no separate units had been set up to accommodate Negroes for training, and therefore, it would be impossible to accept people of that race." General Henry "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Air Corps defended his service's position and reiterated the standard argument that since there were no black units in the Air Corps, there was no way to utilize them. He added that "negro pilots cannot be used in our present Air Corps units since this would result in having negro officers serving over white enlisted men," creating "an impossible social problem." These and other similar comments were sent to the War Department in mid-1940 to resist the utilization of African Americans. The War Department Operations Division as well as Personnel and Intelligence, and the Secretary of War, all concurred with the position of the Air Corps.

But, by the end of 1940, continued pressure and Army officials forced the Air Corps to develop suitable plans for the utilization of blacks and to accept its share of the Selective Service quota. The Army Ground Forces and Services of Supply insisted that the only fair method of distribution was to spread blacks equitably throughout the Army; otherwise the nonflying units would carry an unfair burden.

Therefore, the AAF planned for the establishment of a black flying unit. Since there would be a limited number of enlisted blacks needing training, the Air Corps did not want to create a special school that would draw from its short supply of qualified instructors and supervisors. So, the Corps adopted the expedient to organize technical training at an established facility, and Chanute Field, Illinois was chosen. Tuskegee was selected as the site for pilot training, and the Air Corps notified Training Command in early November, 1940 to prepare for its formation and organization. Tuskegee would be “fully equivalent, with respect to the character of living conditions, facilities, equipment, and training, to that provided for white personnel under similar conditions.”

Brig. Gen. W. R. Weaver, Commanding General of the Southeastern Air Corps Training Center at Maxwell Field, Alabama, to which Tuskegee was attached, proceeded with the AAF plan. Black pilots were to be trained under the supervision of 11 white officers and 15 white non-commissioned officers until such time that a sufficient number of black airmen could be trained to replace them. However, in accordance with Army Regulation 95-60, the Commanding Officer at Tuskegee had to be white. The AAF plan provided for the training of only 45 black officers during the first year of operation. General Weaver advised Mr. G. L. Washington, Director of Aviation Training at Tuskegee, that “the negro population deserved a successful experiment in flying training; the success of negro youth in the Air Corps hinged upon the fate of the Tuskegee project.”

On 16 January 1941, the War Department announced the formation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and of the Tuskegee training program. Why did the Air Corps decide on a pursuit flying mission for African



General Weaver

Americans? The decision appears to have been based on racial factors. A pilot sitting in a single-seat fighter aircraft necessitated a limited training program for blacks. Had bombers been selected, there would have been the additional training need for bombardiers, navigators, and gunners, placing a greater strain on the segregated facilities.

In spite of the admission of blacks into flying training, Air Corps leaders were reluctant throughout the war to expand their training program and combat role. Because of this resistance, the entire flying program for black pilots suffered, the result of which was a sluggish program that progressed slowly through each phase until pressure forced the AAF to take some action. This hesitation is evident from correspondence and memoranda. In a mid-1942 discussion with the Directorate of Individual Training, the Air Staff concluded that African Americans did not do well in World War I under their own officers “due to the emotional characteristics of the race.” And so it was up to the 99th and 100th Pursuit Squadrons to prove the black’s ability in the Air Corps. “A test by fire,” those responsible for training contended, “is the only one of recordable worth.”

Although publicity surrounding the formation of Tuskegee and the pursuit squadron occupied much space in the press and the attention of many both in and out of the AAF, the vast majority of African Americans were in support rather than in flying units. Most served in units such as Aviation Squadrons, Air Base Defense Units, Quartermaster Battalions, Ordnance Companies, Transportation Companies, and others.

Throughout 1941, as the War Department prepared to accept blacks, the AAF made plans to receive its full quota and by mid-1941 it includ-



Technical Training

ed 2,250 men. To facilitate the task of absorbing these new recruits, the AAF organized them into nine segregated Aviation Squadrons of 250 men each to be stationed at various bases throughout the South. These squadrons would perform routine duties at the fields, including labor tasks requiring maintenance, truck driving, interior guard duty, assistance around hanger areas, airdrome maintenance, and other housekeeping and labor chores.

Ironically, the small numbers the AAF had difficulty assigning in 1941 would give way to thousands as a result of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In January 1942, the War Department notified the AAF that its quota would be 53,299 by the end of the year. In addition, the AAF was assigned 24,293 black men from the Arms and Services (ASWAAF), a rather random official designation for a variety of units which operated with AAF units, but were on loan from other arms and services. The AAF attempted to restrict the use and numbers of African Americans, but the War Department was resolute in its decision that the AAF utilize its full share. The majority of them were assigned into units assigned to jobs which did not require high skill levels. In fact, many of these units were really labor battalions and had been so designated in World War I. The majority were assigned to Aviation Squadrons, and these units attracted great attention because of the sheer numbers of men involved in undefined tasks. Judge William Hastie, the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, was quick to investigate and complain. He objected to the segregation, the fact that they seemed to have no mission except to absorb black recruits, and on many bases they were assigned to "pick and shovel" jobs which were considered common and menial.

Nonetheless, the AAF, supported by the War Department, did not alter its policy that lower intelligence, educational background, and leadership levels dictated the utilization of blacks. As a result, morale and performance were definitely affected in those units where they functioned without any real purpose or were interrupted in their training to do housekeeping chores. Blacks in these units objected to their assignment to labor tasks, and "unit after unit" disclosed that they resented the fact that they were exclusively black. Also, some complained that the "high-fallutin" name of Aviation Squadron was offensive, for it was simply window-dressing to deceive the public. The situation inevitably resulted in poor morale which led to Absence Without Leave (AWOL), drunk and disorderly conduct, failure to obey orders, insulting language, and breaches of discipline.

Later in the war, the Women's Army Corps (WAC) reported similar problems. Many of the unskilled black women who entered the service were still unassignable by the middle of the war. A large number were sent to bases as unskilled personnel, and local commanders were hard pressed to assign them tasks.

In addition to morale problems caused by the haphazard assignment



Women's Army Corps (WAC)

procedures, black pilots and those in technical positions also experienced numerous frustrations. The restricted facilities at Tuskegee coupled with short-sighted AAF plans created numerous problems, including a sizeable backlog of qualified applicants waiting to enlist. Since the War Department and AAF upheld segregated training, African Americans were not permitted to attend a number of other AAF technical training and flying centers because of a lack of segregated facilities. White candidates entering flying training had at times to wait a few weeks before beginning training, while a much longer wait was usually in store for black candidates. Some qualified black men were drafted before the AAF could accept them for segregated training.

Progress in expanding AAF assignments for blacks remained sluggish and delays were commonplace. The AAF vigorously maintained that the number of men called coincided with existing vacancies, and any other policy would be wasteful and serve no useful purpose. In some instances strict adherence to policies affecting black pilots became detrimental to their morale. Many qualified pilots were thwarted in their attempts to advance because the AAF unconditionally had refused to permit them to engage in anything but pursuit flying. Because of this restriction, when a black pilot candidate washed out of pursuit flying, he had no alternative training program to enter, while there were numerous alternatives open to whites.

There were additional problems for African Americans attempting to enter technical training. An example of the illogic that plagued black

progress throughout the war was a report by Air Staff Personnel that “the race of an individual is immaterial to eligibility for admission to aviation cadet courses of training.” But, Personnel continued, “the number of Negro candidates assigned to any particular course of aviation cadet training will not exceed the number of graduates that can be utilized in Negro units of the AAF.” It is apparent that the second statement contradicts the first, yet the AAF and War Department continued to maintain that segregation did not restrict opportunities for blacks in the military.

The areas of flying and technical training became most vulnerable issues for the AAF, and that service was constantly under attack by African Americans leaders. Judge Hastie, his successor Truman Gibson, and leaders of the NAACP were most persistent in exploiting the weaknesses in the AAF’s argument over segregation. For example, the AAF needed 10,000 meteorologists, and since there were only seven vacancies for blacks, many with the proper qualifications were refused entry into the program. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate with special advanced study in biology and biochemistry was assigned as a laborer to a Signal Construction Battalion.

Once blacks had been accepted into the AAF, other problems continued to hamper their advancement. After the plans for expansion were developed, there was the persistent obstacle of where to station them. As early as 1941, reacting to announcements that blacks were scheduled for assignment to specific bases, commanders and spokesmen for local communities registered a barrage of complaints with the War Department. In early 1942, the AAF issued a memorandum to its stations and surveyed possible locations for the stationing of blacks. The replies must have been disheartening. Most bases reported that either the military commanders or the local communities did not desire them at their locations. Some would accept only a limited number, and others would only accept southerners. Base leaders protested to no avail as the AAF sent blacks to all locations, including Eglin Field, Florida, Ellington Field near Houston, Texas, and Bakersfield, California.

Local citizens were also vocal in their opposition to bringing black soldiers into their communities. During the early part of the war and most noticeably in the south, civilians wrote or had their Congressmen write to the War Department and the AAF. Generally, their letters reflected racial fears about the disproportionate number of blacks in the area. Local citizens expressed concern that since there was a shortage of recreational opportunities for them, the latter might use white facilities as a result. The volume of correspondence was considerable, but the AAF response was standard, stressing that it was aware of the concerns of local citizens, that the AAF had its quota and must assign blacks to all bases, that the Army was doing everything possible to provide adequate recreational facilities, that the AAF hoped civilians would cooperate, and that blacks were members of the Armed Forces and deserved to be treated as such.



These difficulties in the assignment of blacks concerned the War Department and Secretary of War Stimson. The War Department, under the prodding of Secretary Stimson, was resolute in notifying local and overseas commanders that they would have to accept their quota of blacks, and it is significant that he played a leading role in those decisions.

With the acceptance of hundreds of thousands of men into the AAF during the early part of the war, there was a noticeable deficiency in the expansion program – no provision for the training of nonflying black officer personnel. Prior to World War II, pilots had performed all administrative duties, but with the increased sophistication of flying this was no longer practical. The AAF finally realized the need for a ground school to train 12,000 officers, including African Americans. Late in 1941, the AAF pressed the War Department for its own administrative schools, and in early 1942 the AAF designated Miami Beach, Florida as its Officer Candidate School (OCS). Soon, the first class entered and utilized existing civilian facilities. The Adjutant General directed in April that a proportionate share of each OCS quota be allotted to blacks. As a result, most OCS classes included blacks, and the official histories report that “few difficulties were encountered.” With the exception of sleeping quarters, black candidates were completely integrated into the program, but outside the school area they had to abide by local customs.

The relative ease with which the program accepted blacks contrasts sharply with the opposition which resulted when the AAF first announced that they would go to Miami Beach. The local commander, Congressman, and civilians all protested since blacks already were not permitted to live in Miami Beach. Congressional pressure forced the Air Staff to reexamine its decision to include blacks in the Miami Beach program and to reconsider the prospect of a separate school for blacks, but military efficiency was an overriding factor. A separate school would be costly in terms of the small numbers of blacks trained and could lead as well to protests and difficulties in locating a suitable site. Also, the War College studies of the post-World War I period were hostile to any future use of black officers, but at the same time took the position that, if they must be used, they should be trained along with white officer candidates.

African Americans attended OCS throughout the war, but in small numbers. A black candidate who graduated in January 1944 maintained that personnel treated him fairly, although the school generally did not promote blacks as regularly as whites. All recreational facilities at the OCS were available, including the night clubs. Everyone wore uniforms so club managers knew that those entering their clubs attended the school and, therefore, were welcome. But the main problem was the absence of black women on the Beach. When there was free time, blacks went to Miami for recreation. At the school there were only two restrictions – rooms were segregated and they had to go to Miami for haircuts. As for

the attitude of whites toward this almost total integration, they really had no choice; if they behaved in a discriminatory fashion, they could be reported and washed out. And the instructors were fair because they were well screened and very capable. Later, when the school moved to San Antonio and Maxwell Field, it was reported that blacks were well treated and received a minimum of discriminatory treatment.

The treatment of blacks at Miami Beach demonstrates a trend that the AAF might have applied to its entire training program. Instructors and white students were briefed on how to treat blacks and were encouraged to deal with them fairly. Granted, there were small numbers, but because the AAF took a positive stand, the Miami Beach program was a success. Had military leaders demonstrated a similar strength of purpose at other locations, perhaps there might have been fewer racial problems. Yet, the AAF was unwilling to make that commitment and viewed the integrated OCS as an exception.

Throughout the Second World War, large numbers of African Americans entered the Army Air Forces. At the end of 1942, there were thousands of blacks in the AAF, whereas there were none the previous year. By June 1944, the AAF had 145,242 blacks in its total force of over 2 million men. Though there were noticeable breakthroughs for blacks entering the Army Air Forces, the AAF remained reluctant to accept them and had made repeated attempts to restrict their progress. By April 1945 only one of 90 was an officer while 1/6th of the white force was commissioned. The AAF organized a vast majority into segregated service units performing more or less routine tasks about the bases, while more black officers were flying personnel or worked in related positions. Any progress that was made resulted from political pressure directed against the War Department, which then exhorted the AAF to revise its policies. Despite the fact that War Department officials often agreed with AAF attitudes, the War Department did appear on occasion to be impatient with AAF intransigence. In spite of the success of the OCS program to integrate blacks, almost all blacks in the AAF served in segregated units and lived in segregated facilities. The general reluctance of the AAF to utilize them created tensions that erupted throughout the war. These conflicts will be described in the following sections.

## **AAF Black Military Personnel**

September 1942 - March 1946

<b>Month/Year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Officers</b>	<b>Enlisted</b>
September, 1942	37,223	142	37,081
December, 1942	71,824	129	71,695
March, 1943	106,409	255	106,154
June, 1943	114,075	359	113,716
September, 1943	130,372	605	129,767
December, 1943	145,025	636	144,389
March, 1944	140,857	904	139,953
June, 1944	145,242	1,107	144,135
September, 1944	140,728	1,243	139,485
December, 1944	137,806	1,303	136,503
March, 1945	136,827	1,464	135,363
June, 1945	140,462	1,559	138,903
September, 1945	133,447	1,511	131,936
December, 1945	69,016	1,050	67,966
March, 1946	42,564	778	41,786

Source: Army Air Forces Statistical Digest, 1946, p. 23, AFSHRC134. 11-6.

## **The Army Air Forces: Black Officers and Flying Units**

A large percentage of African American manpower in the AAF was utilized in service units, yet most of the publicity, credit, and glory went to the pursuit pilots. Though much money and effort were expended on the flying program, the history of black flying units reveals only partial success. The 99th Squadron and the 332d Group, made up of the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Squadron, performed in a creditable manner in the Mediterranean Theater. On the other hand, the 477th Group never completed its training for overseas deployment and by the end of the war in Europe, had practically collapsed as a unit. Although each unit was segregated, its success or failure depended mainly on the attitude of those in the command structures. The 99th and 332d were unique in the history of black units in the military in that all of their officers were black. Inspired by an opportunity to “prove themselves” and led by a strict military disciplinarian, they performed as well as any comparable white unit. However, the 477th represented segregation at its worst. The key officers in this unit were white and frequently used their positions as a stepping-stone for promotion and reassignment to more important positions. In addition, they were often indifferent to the needs of the unit and were condescending toward the blacks under their command. Thus, the 477th never performed its mission.

The AAF conducted all basic training for black pilots at Tuskegee Field, Alabama. At first, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, flying single-engine fighter planes, absorbed all graduates. Later, the AAF organized the 332d Fighter Group, which incorporated three other squadrons. The 99th completed its training and arrived in the Mediterranean Theater in 1943. In the same year, the 332d moved to Selfridge Field, Michigan where it completed its preparation for overseas deployment, arriving in the Mediterranean in early 1944. Meanwhile, the AAF initiated plans in late 1943 to form the 477th Bombardment Group to fly twin-engine bombers. Tuskegee lacked the facilities for conducting this new training, and it became necessary to send blacks to other fields. Hondo Field, Texas received Navigation cadets; Midland, Texas trained Bombardiers; and Mather Field, California accomplished some twin-engine transition training. The 477th began its training at Selfridge, but in mid-1944 moved to Godman Field, Kentucky where it stayed until March 1945. The unit then moved to Freeman Field, Indiana, where it remained a month before returning to Godman. Units of the 477th now joined with returning personnel from the 332d to form the 477th Composite Group under the command of Colonel B. O. Davis, Jr. At the same time, replacement pilots for the 332d trained first at a satellite field of Selfridge — Oscoda — and then at Walterboro, South Carolina.

Black flying units were confronted with a veritable maze of racial problems, most of which were created by the AAF. The AAF dogmatically pursued a system of segregation that was almost impossible to maintain. It even went so far as to violate War Department regulations to prevent the mixing of whites and blacks in officers' clubs. Understandably, many problems developed as a result of this uncompromising position. Primary was the psychological degradation implicit in the workings of segregation. Then there was the problem caused by the absence of black cadres to supplement black units. While a mixture of new and experienced personnel comprised white units going into combat, when the 99th began flying the Mediterranean in 1943, it consisted entirely of personnel new to combat operations. Third was the friction caused when commanders did not want black flying units in their operational areas. For example, in June 1945 there were discussions concerning the possibility of sending a black flying unit to the Pacific; Generals George Marshall and Douglas MacArthur approved, but the AAF commander there opposed the idea. General Henry Arnold wrote that "it is O. K. from the W. D. viewpoint to send them but when [General] Kenney uses them down in Mindanao or Borneo don't be surprised of the criticisms that are received." Finally, there were restrictions on the types of training open to blacks. Since the AAF considered their use in flying as an "experiment," it first employed them in single-engine planes exclusively and only gradually permitted black pilots to train in more sophisticated aircraft. Officials rejected some flying programs solely because of the fear that racial problems would arise. This was true of the Transport Command, since providing adequate food and lodging facilities created too great a problem for pilots flying around the country, especially in the South.

Tuskegee Army Air Field was located near the town of Tuskegee and Tuskegee Institute in southeastern Alabama. The AAF did everything possible to build the complex into a first-rate training center and to keep racial problems at a minimum. To a large extent, it was successful in both objectives. The training African Americans received was comparable to that received by whites, and Judge Hastie noted that "the best of facilities and thoroughly competent instructors were provided for." It is probable that political factors were responsible for the high caliber of training and equipment at Tuskegee. One official history notes "that the Tuskegee undertaking was considered by the War Department as No. 1 priority" because of the "political pressure that had been brought to bear upon the White House and the War Department to provide pilot training for negroes." Any delay could "seriously embarrass the War Department."

The AAF attempted to establish a "separate but equal" facility at Tuskegee. But living and other conditions aggravated racial problems, and the segregated system compounded its own deficiencies. For one, there was serious overcrowding. Overused facilities hindered flying training and generally obstructed operations. An explanation for this



Maj. Gen. Walter R. Weaver delivers the inaugural address opening the new Air Corps school for training black aviators at Tuskegee.

poor planning was the AAF's attempt to solve the black training program by placing all of its basic flight training at Tuskegee, but, unfortunately, the facilities were not adequate to meet this demand. Once the pilots were trained, the AAF did not immediately transfer them into operational units. Overcrowding at Tuskegee became more acute in 1942 and 1943, as the 99th remained on the station until April 1943. Two other organizations also strained the facilities. The 96th Service Group, organized to support black flying units, received a minimal amount of tactical training during 1942 because no training facilities had been arranged. Only a year later did it finally receive training and then move to Selfridge. The 332d Group with its three squadrons and support organizations also created problems until it made its move to Selfridge in March 1943. While at Tuskegee, the Training Command history reports that the 332d "had difficulties with its training in that no adequate facilities existed on the station for its training and during the time it was at Tuskegee practically no tactical training was accomplished." Then in July 1943, the War Department further overtaxed the base and assigned 50 liaison pilots to train for the Army Ground Forces. Fifty aircraft of three different types and speeds already used the main field, so liaison training was conducted at an auxiliary field.



Cadets reporting to Capt. B.O. Davis, Jr., Commandant of Cadets; Cadet Marion A.B. Carter presenting his orders. Capt. B.O. Davis, Jr. also will take pilot instruction. Atlanta, Georgia. August, 1941.

Another factor which contributed to the cramped facilities at Tuskegee was, as the unit history designates them, the “unwieldy surplus,” mainly nonflying personnel. Early in 1942, the AAF stopped the practice of discharging those eliminated from the flying school, made them privates, and retained them at Tuskegee. Unlike eliminated white candidates who could be reassigned to other flying programs, there simply was no other place for blacks. Consequently, by September 1943, the majority of the 286 eliminated cadets who were still at Tuskegee had low morale. Besides having no real function, they were embittered over racial conditions which they believed worked against them, and the black press further fanned their discontent. By late 1943, some did enter navigator and bombardier schools, but their departure had no great impact upon the excessive numbers which continued to increase.

In July 1943, Tuskegee received 25 Signal Corps officers from Selfridge. The Eastern Flying Training Command (EFTC) was well aware



Technical Training



Technical Training

that although these officers were not being assigned commensurate with their training and background, retraining them was detrimental to morale and not in the best interest of the service. Again, there simply was no other place to send them. By the end of October 1943, Tuskegee reported that there was an excess of 90 officers on the field and that most of them were second lieutenants who were well trained and anxious for proper duty. Then in December 1943, the Air Service Command unexpectedly transferred to Tuskegee 30 Quartermaster Officers from Daniel Field, Georgia. By this



Technical Training





301st Armorers at work. (L to R) T/Sgt Roland L. Poindexter, Washington, D.C.; S/Sgt. Samuel Mumford, Valdosta, Georgia; Cpl. Albert C. Knight, Mobile, Alabama.

time blacks were attending the Miami Beach OCS regularly and an average of seven of its graduates per month arrived for nonflying assignments. At an August 1944 conference between key officers from Tuskegee and the EFTC, officers revealed that there was then a wasted manpower surplus of 105 non-rated black officers, including 75 AAF and 30 ASWAAF. In addition, the OCS at San Antonio began sending eight more graduates each month.

The situation at Tuskegee was most frustrating for blacks, but it also presented a serious problem to dedicated white officers who attempted to bring order out of chaos. The histories of the EFTC for 1943 and 1944 were quite frank and critical in assessing this predicament and noted that there was little that could be done. Colonel Noel Parrish, the Tuskegee commander, made a concerted effort to function under the circumstances; and his frustration is evident in a handwritten note appended to a heavy file which discussed overcrowding. The note asked plaintively: "Why do they all come to Tuskegee."

In addition to the problem of overcrowding, the Tuskegee commander faced others that were "difficult and voluminous." Because of the structure of the black flying program, one of the greatest difficulties encountered was that there were several commands with overlapping operational control over black units. There was a continuous stream of phone calls and exchanges with the Training Command, Eastern Training Command, First Air Force, AAF Headquarters, and others, and little or no coordination among them since most communications were made outside the normal chain of command. This lack of coordination particularly affected Tuskegee's immediate headquarters at Maxwell.



Pilot Training

Colonel Parrish had to make numerous trips to the Pentagon to secure decisions on matters so involved that normal channels of command had failed to produce results. "Every promotion, every assignment, nearly every decision," he later stated, "had a black and white side to it that we had to consider, as well as the purely military side and the side of efficiency."

There were also difficulties with the local community. Tuskegee was a typical southern town with its white control and Jim Crow system of treating African Americans. Black soldiers from the station reported harassment from whites and tended to avoid the town and instead used the social facilities either on base or at Tuskegee Institute.

Relations on base and with the local community often depended on the attitude of the commander. Colonels Frederick Kimble and Noel Parrish were the two commanders at Tuskegee during the period it was a full training facility, and there was a marked contrast between them. Kimble was paternalistic and somewhat skeptical of the black's ability to fly an aircraft. He appeared to be blind to the racial problems inherent in the training of blacks in the south.

The job of commander at Tuskegee required close coordination with both whites and blacks, and while Colonel Kimble was successful with the former, he never was able to gain the respect and confidence of the latter. His attempts to maintain a strict segregated system undermined morale and this was played up by the black press. However, Colonel Parrish's long tenure as commander, from December 1942 until 1946,

made him especially cognizant of Tuskegee's particular problems, and he was able to work well with blacks and whites and to improve relations with the town. He was a student of practical psychology and, to avoid misunderstandings, would occasionally address local groups to explain a particular policy or incident. He maintained that his upbringing in Kentucky had been of great advantage in dealing with white southerners.

Colonel Parrish was successful as the commander of Tuskegee. Morale, which had been low during the latter part of 1942 and early 1943, improved considerably, helped no doubt by the reduced overcrowded conditions when tactical units were moved to Selfridge and overseas in the spring. Under Parrish, segregation was reduced and he enforced War Department directives about equality of treatment. He earned the respect of blacks, for as one black pilot remarked: "The only thing that struck me was why have a white in charge of the base when there were qualified blacks. But if there had to be a white, he was the best one."

The 99th Squadron and 332d Group were the only black flying units to enter combat, and they flew missions solely in the Mediterranean Theater. The 99th went to North Africa in April 1943, and flew its first combat mission against the island of Pantelleria on 2 June. Later, the squadron participated in the air battle against Sicily, operating from its base in North Africa, and supported the invasion of Italy. It moved to an advanced base in Sicily after the island's occupation and in September 1943 moved to a base on mainland Italy. Although the 99th was successful in its primary mission of strafing, the pilots did not gain the glory of shooting down more than a handful of enemy aircraft until early 1944. From then until the end of the war, the squadron regularly engaged German pilots in aerial combat. It received its share of successes, and



Col. Kimble



Col. Parrish



Tuskegee Army Air Field, Tuskegee Alabama. Cadets at mess, June 1942.

gained recognition from high-ranking AAF officials that it was an experienced combat unit.

In the meantime, three squadrons of the 332d Group completed their training at Selfridge Field, and in January 1944 deployed to Italy under the command by Colonel Davis. The Group at once entered combat and successfully accomplished dive-bombing and strafing missions. In July, the 99th was added to the 332d, and the Group participated in campaigns in Italy, Rumania, France, Germany, and the Balkans, and earned the



Staff officers of an all black Air Corps squadron, near Fez, French Morocco.  
 (L to R) Lt. Col. Benjamin O. Davis, C.O.; Capt. Hayden C. Johnson; Capt.  
 E. Jones; Lt. Wm. R. Thompson; Lt. Herbert E. Carter; Lt. Erwin B.  
 Lawrence; Lt. George R. Currie.



Black pilots in the Mediterranean

Distinguished Unit Citation. After the war, the senior AAF commander in the Mediterranean, Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, commented that the 332d “did a very good job.”

More important than the record of their combat performance is to study the way in which black units were treated overseas and the impact their performance had on decisions concerning the future utilization of black pilots. In general, it can be said that within the framework of segregation, they were treated well in terms of facilities, recreational provisions, combat responsibilities, and general attitude. General Eaker was complementary, and white crew members appreciated the work the pilots of the 332d did to protect the bombers. But the segregated system was “a slap in the face.”

There was some early criticism by the AAF leadership in the Mediterranean theater focusing on the inexperience of the pilots, the lack of air discipline, and a lack of aggressive spirit. This issue of the combat effectiveness of the 99th was submitted to the McCloy Committee, a special committee established in the War Department for handling policies concerning black troops. Colonel Davis had returned to the United States to assume command of the 332d and gave his impressions to the committee. Davis pointed to the issues of combat replacements that did not arrive as with white units and the lack of any experience cadre as existed in other combat units. For example, because of segregation, it was not possible for the 99th to profit from the experience of white flight leaders.

The analysis of the 99th by high-ranking AAF officers is typical of the approach used in evaluating black performance during both World Wars. The officers who evaluated black units failed to take into consideration the impact racial factors had upon the personnel of the unit before and during the period it was in combat. The men of the 99th were capable, trained, and qualified, and they could have become members of any squadron and functioned well in combat. They gradually acquired experi-



Black pilots in the Mediterranean



ence and confidence, and achieved an expertise comparable to other squadron members. The only official statistical analysis conducted on the 99th during the war concluded that there was “no significant general difference between this squadron and the balance of the P-40 squadrons in the MTO.”

In 1943, the War Department and AAF devoted considerable attention to the 99th, because there were discussions to expand the flying role



Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker and group commander Lt. Col. B.O. Davis, Jr. inspect an all black fighter group of the Mediterranean Allied Air Force.

of African Americans. Judge Hastie's sudden resignation as the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War in January brought some changes, but the AAF was still reluctant to plan for more black pilots. Yet, by the end of the year, final plans had been made for the formation of a black medium bombardment group – the 477th – and personnel for that unit would begin training at Tuskegee, Mather, Hondo, Roswell, and Midland Fields.

Political pressure played a major role in the creation of the 477th. General Barney Giles, an Air Staff officer, referred to the problem of the use of blacks as “political dynamite” and believed that War Department leaders would “be forced by public opinion into the decision which thus far they have been unwilling to make.” The Operations Division of the Air Staff noted that there was “political pressure to use Negro troops in more than one type of aviation,” and the 477th would satisfy such a demand.

Just because more blacks would be training in flying positions did not mean that race relations would improve. During the last two years of the war, race relations affecting black flying units at many stateside bases deteriorated. A key issue within the 477th Group and other units that frequently precipitated racial conflict was the base officers' club. The treatment of black officers on the club issue reveals the attitude of their white superiors and other AAF leaders. Put another way, the club issue was one place where black officers could challenge the AAF on racial matters.

Army Regulation (AR) 210-10 stated that Officers' clubs had to extend “to all officers on duty at the post the right to full membership.” In practice, however, African Americans were not afforded the right to membership. Base commanders often found it difficult to accept them within the same social surroundings as whites at an officers' club. The concept of the “officers' home” and the racial attitudes of many military personnel ran counter to AF 210-10 and the desire of black officers to be



Gen. Giles

members of an integrated social organization. Where blacks were few in number or concentrated at all-black bases such as Tuskegee, little could be done to correct the abuse. But at Selfridge and Freeman Fields, a large group of black officers encountered segregation at the officers' club and the outcome was quite different.

Actually, not all bases presented problems for black officers and cadets. The OCS at Miami Beach was integrated. At Randolph Field, Texas, all officers attending the School of Aviation Medicine were encouraged to use the officers' club. At other bases, such as Hondo and Midland Texas, there were separate and equal clubs, and both races seemed to accept the situation. On the other hand, conditions at those bases isolated from public scrutiny were not so amiable. One report from Kessler Field, Mississippi notes that the base excluded black officers from the main officers' club, although for a short time it billed them for membership without permitting its use. At the Orlando, Florida Intelligence School, blacks were not permitted to use the white officers' club, and their club consisted of a converted barracks.

At Selfridge Field, the operational training base for the 332d and 477th, race relations gradually deteriorated. The most significant racial incident in 1943 occurred when the white base commander shot and wounded a black soldier. The commander had been drunk and supposedly had stated: "I repeatedly gave instructions that I did not want a colored chauffeur." The AAF court-martialed the colonel.

The Air Surgeon asked a consultant, Dr. Lawrence A. Kubie, who had been conducting a psychiatric study of black pilots at Selfridge and Oscoda, to examine the colonel. Dr. Kubie went beyond his charter and made some interesting observations about racial conditions at the two fields. He noted that morale suffered most when race relations deteriorated, and segregation beyond basic training generated poor race relations,



thus hampering military efficiency. More crucial was the fact that the existence of separate black units fostered an emotional build-up that grew deeper and more charged as the war progressed. It followed that minor incidents appeared to provoke major racial disturbances. Kubie found rapport to be better at Oscoda than Selfridge because at Selfridge the whites tended "to wear the airs of white superiority," while the small number at Oscoda felt "pride in the Negroes they were training." The AAF and Air Surgeon ignored Dr. Kubie's observations and recommendations.

During the first six months of 1944, race relations at Selfridge rapidly worsened, and the AAF was forced to remove all black flying personnel from the field. The precipitating factor was a dispute over the use of the officers' club. Added to this was the continued anxiety by the War Department and AAF arising from the summer 1943 race riot in Detroit.

The initial confrontation took place on 1 January 1944 when three black officers visited the club and were told by the base commander that they were not welcome. According to the War Department Inspector's report, the commander "forbade Negro officers to use the Officers' Club and employed insulting language in conveying his views on this subject to a Negro officer." The commanding officers of the 553d told the black officers in his command "that he would court-martial for inciting a riot, the first man who stepped into the Officers' Club." The AAF supported the base and 553d commanders' positions and blamed the black press and racial agitators in Detroit for causing the difficulties. The AAF recommended moving the black units to another location. The service looked at using Antigua or Saint Lucia in the Caribbean, but rejected those locations as being impractical. The base resolved its club problem by closing the club.

Meanwhile on the base, conditions did not improve, even though the War Department relieved and reprimanded the base commander. Transcripts of recorded phone conversations indicate that the entire AAF chain of command up through General Arnold supported the base commander and encouraged him in his efforts. The black units fell under Major General Frank Hunter, First Air Force Commander, and in referring to segregation, he said to higher headquarters that "I didn't condone it, I ordered it." General Hunter visited Selfridge in the spring of 1944 and told a black newspaperman that "Negroes can't expect to obtain equality in 200 years and probably won't, except in some distinct future." Hunter and other AAF officers complained about the unrelenting pressure that fell on that service from the War Department.

In May, the 477th was transferred from Selfridge to Godman Field, Kentucky, and the 553d to Walterboro, South Carolina. Official unit histories make no suggestion that racial factors were largely responsible for the move. The First Air Force history furnishes as reasons "hazards and interruptions," such as smoke from the industrial areas and winter weather. The history of the 477th states that the "transfer was made to make use



Gen. Hunter

of better atmospheric conditions for flying.” However, behind the scenes in the War Department and AAF, among the black fliers, and within the black community, the real reason for the move was no secret. One black officer reported on General Hunter’s visit in March during which Hunter told the black officers that there “will be no race problem here for he will not tolerate any mixing of the races and anyone who protests will be classed as an agitator, sought out and dealt with accordingly.”

Race relations were at a standoff while the 553d was at Walterboro. General Hunter wanted some form of segregation maintained, because he believed “that’s the way they run things down in South Carolina.” When during the summer of 1944 the War Department ordered that facilities would be utilized by both whites and blacks, white officers refused to attend the club and rented facilities in the town.

Because the Army Air Forces seldom exhibited strong positive direction in the area of race relations, basic issues affecting black flying units in the United States remained unresolved at the end of 1944. The ambiguity of segregation policy and dominance by the white command structure, coupled with increased pressure by blacks, fostered a breakdown in communication that led the following year to a conflict at Freeman Field, Indiana. Overseas, the story was quite different as the 332d became an integral part of the Allied fighting machine. Other AAF officers there respected and accepted the blacks. Within the AAF, the treatment of small groups of black officers at various bases ranged from good to discriminatory. The degree of acceptance was relative to the amount of public attention focused on the base. But the treatment of the 477th exemplified the most harmful attitudes of many officers.

## 1943: Era of Change

During the course of the war, the War Department and AAF spent much time, money, and effort to assure employment of black troops with a minimum of racial difficulty. They conducted surveys and staff studies, wrote pamphlets and manuals, produced films and radio broadcasts, and passed down the chain of command a constant stream of letters, memoranda, and instructions. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this activity, but it is clear that racial tensions did not subside as the war progressed, and the AAF's most explosive racial disturbance took place in April 1945. An obvious explanation for persistent racial unrest with the military was that society continued to compound the racial problems. Furthermore, the fact that many military leaders were not convinced of the usefulness of blacks in the war effort did not contribute to better racial harmony. It is apparent, however, that as the war progressed, attitudes at the highest levels with the War Department underwent a major and significant change. From 1940 through early 1943, officials generally believed in the inferiority of African Americans, were afraid to incorporate them into the armed forces, and were certain that conspirators, inspired by Communists, Japanese spies, or other un-American groups, were responsible for racial strife. This theory rested on the assumption that the country had solved its racial problem through a separate-but-equal doctrine that blacks found acceptable and that any challenge to the status quo had to be explained on the basis of alien forces stimulating the dissatisfaction of racially inferior blacks. However, beginning in 1943, the War Department began to reflect a changed attitude. There was an increasing acceptance of the notion that African Americans were not racially inferior, but were victims of the environment, racism, prejudice, and segregation.

Unfortunately, because of a decided lack of commitment on the part of some AAF leaders, this attitudinal change did not filter down to lower command levels. Racial difficulties might have been minimized had AAF leaders rigidly enforced equality of treatment for all personnel and exhibited the moral leadership sought by War Department officials. Rather, throughout the chain of command, commanders found ways to circumvent War Department and AAF directives.

During the period of the pre-World War II military buildup, African Americans became increasingly vocal, pressuring the War Department and the President to be more responsive to their problems and to be more assertive in assuring their fair employment in the military services. A result of this action was the formation of the all-black Office of the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, organized to "facilitate the equitable and orderly integration of Negroes into the Army." Its responsibilities, at first vague, were later expanded, and the office was given an

important role when the War Department announced that all policy matters pertaining to blacks were to be referred to the Civilian Aide “for comment or concurrence before final action.”

Judge William H. Hastie was appointed as the first Civilian Aide. He brought a broad legal background, an outstanding reputation, and a dedication to crusade actively against discrimination. Hastie remained in this position until January 1943, when Truman Gibson assumed the post. During the war years, each man stamped his own personality upon the office, although Hastie generally received much of the publicity.

Hastie was ineffective in working within the War Department, and evidence demonstrates that the War Department itself has to accept most of the responsibility. High-ranking officials displayed a steadfast reluctance to utilize blacks in the war effort and did not take Hastie seriously. They rarely consulted him on policy questions affecting blacks and misconstrued his suggestions as threats rather than as constructive criticism. During these early years, it is unlikely that anyone could have effectively functioned in the office, given the inflexible attitude of many military officers. Hastie had to confront those who perpetuated racial stereotypes and accepted Jim Crow practices, and he experienced constant frustration.

In addition, Judge Hastie’s identification with the NAACP, a “colored uplift” society, created a cleavage between his office and the military. His influence was not evident in fundamental policy decisions within the War Department, but rather in tackling discrimination “point by point.” Hastie funneled his energies into processing individual complaints of discriminatory treatment, channeling them to the proper agency within the War Department. One of his primary goals was the elimination of discrimination of any form within the military, and Hastie and his assistants pursued that goal through countless cases.

The aides flooded every level of the War Department with letters, including the offices of the Secretary of War (Stimson), his Under Secretary (Patterson), Assistant Secretary (McCloy), and Assistant Secretary for Air (Lovett). Further down the chain of command, they sent memoranda to the Chief of Staff, the Chief of the AAF, the Inspector General, the Adjutant General, and others. During the course of 1941 and 1942 Assistant Secretary Robert A. Lovett had the responsibility to resolve questions concerning African Americans in the AAF, but in the later stages of the war, John J. McCloy assumed the task as head of the Committee on Negro Troop Policies. Hastie’s and Gibson’s correspondence to Lovett and McCloy was voluminous and challenging on many issues, as the aides were realistic about the basic conservatism inherent within the War Department concerning racial matters. For example, Lovett was concerned about the pressure Hastie used to affect change in the AAF and was afraid that some people might expect a change in the policy of segregation. Therefore, Lovett informed the AAF that “there must be and will be segregation.”



Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson (left), Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, and Assistant Secretary of War for Air Robert A. Lovett.

Aside from the Office of the Civilian Aide, numerous civilian organizations were successful in channeling their efforts toward accomplishing change within the War Department. The two most vocal and active black groups were the black press and the NAACP. The black press reached the pinnacle of its influence during World War II, and touched most blacks in one fashion or another. The black press had conducted for over a decade a relentless crusade to ensure equal participation by blacks in the armed services, and it zealously exposed and publicized any discrimination toward them. The NAACP was also active in fighting discrimination in the military. Because the NAACP took a stand on key issues and gained favorable publicity, it enjoyed a tremendous increase in branches and membership. The result was that many in the War Department and AAF viewed the black press and NAACP as militants and radicals stirring up the black soldier. However, they did not relent in their attempt to elicit change and to end discrimination and segregation. Win or lose, they were pressure groups with which the War Department had to deal.

A turn of events within the War Department came with Judge Hastie's resignation on 5 January 1943. Although Hastie was enthusiastic during the early part of his appointment, dissatisfaction soon overcame him. He was not necessarily disenchanted with War Department officials, but the attitudes and policies of the AAF. He characterized the force's sentiments toward him and his office as "hostile" and attributed this largely to General Arnold "who was entirely out of sympathy with my efforts." Also Assistant Secretary of War for Air, Lovett "always seemed politely disinterested in my efforts."



Col. B.O. Davis, Jr., Frank Stanley, President of the National Negro Publishing Association, and Truman K. Gibson, Jr., Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, during a visit to Godman Field.

In his letter of resignation to the Secretary of War, Hastie directed much of his resentment toward the AAF, because some of its recent actions were “so objectionable and inexcusable that I have no alternative but to resign in protest and to give public expression to my views.” He characterized the AAF’s efforts in the race relations field as reactionary and unsatisfactory, and its recent performance as a “further retrogression.” This referred to an AAF study into establishing a segregated OCS at Jefferson Barracks. Hastie included five pages of specific objections.

Hastie’s resignation had a notable impact upon the AAF and the black community. The AAF girded itself for his resignation memorandum, preparing for the brunt of his criticism. Perhaps the AAF’s reaction to the resignation exhibited the first real sign of a constructive outlook toward the employment of African Americans. Since the AAF was well aware of its vulnerability, it began to move with a speed and determination never previously observed in the area of race relations. The Chief of the Air Staff, Major General George Stratemeyer, assumed personal control and acted with dispatch and decisiveness.

General Stratemeyer issued directives to the various commands and directorates in the AAF to correct any problem that Hastie had identified and reiterated the relevant regulations about discrimination and the treatment of blacks. Once again, the AAF was caught in its own bind of not providing equal treatment within its segregated system. For example, white medical doctors attended the Flight Surgeon School at Randolph Field, Texas, while blacks received their training through a correspondence course. The general ensured that there would be no segregated OCS; and he directed that at Tuskegee there would be no separation of the races in official assemblies, in toilet facilities, and messing facilities, and that hereafter black officers would be placed in administrative posts.

General Stratemeyer knew that Tuskegee was the racial showplace of the AAF, and the service must prevent “misunderstandings, difficulties, and demoralizing incidents.”

From 1943 until the end of the war, there appeared to be a decided attitudinal shift among War Department leadership. Policy makers became aware of the full scope of racial problems and attempted viable solutions. To a certain extent, the AAF reaction to Judge Hastie’s resignation exemplifies a fresh new approach. Unfortunately the impetus created by that event was short-lived, although increased demands from the black community and persistent pressure from the War Department caused the AAF to modify its position. Under the chairmanship of Assistant Secretary McCloy, the Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies, commonly referred to as the McCloy Committee, was instrumental in bringing about change. The committee’s purpose was to function as a central agency at the highest levels to coordinate policy for the utilization of black troops.

The McCloy Committee did make a major contribution in influencing War Department policy. As racial tensions escalated in 1943, the committee recommended the dispatch of a letter from General George C. Marshall to his major commanders spelling out their responsibilities. Other discussions concerned the use of black troops in combat, the performance of the 99th Squadron, and equitable recreational facilities. The committee issued a pamphlet, *Command of Negro Troops*, took action on the Freeman Field mutiny, and directly or indirectly introduced numerous other changes.

This shift in War Department outlook was expressed, too, in its general acceptance of Truman Gibson, in marked contrast to its reluctance to recognize Judge Hastie. Gibson was able to take advantage of the uproar precipitated by Hastie’s resignation. His first letter to Assistant Secretary Lovett sought to ease the tension created by the resignation and to lay the groundwork for future cooperation. The communication was well-balanced with constructive criticism tempered by praise and conciliation. For example, he praised Colonel Parrish and the AAF for their efforts to conduct fair and impartial training at Tuskegee, and he offered his office “for any assistance that can be afforded the Army Air Forces in the development of necessary overall plans for Negroes.”

Gibson appeared to maintain good rapport with the War Department, particularly with McCloy and his committee. He returned their confidence through his loyalty, constructive criticism, and objectivity. He publicly praised certain Army actions on policies if they were worthy of praise and criticized segments of the black community if they were deserving of criticism. However, it was inevitable that the closer he worked with the War Department, the more his motives would be questioned by some black leaders. He was labeled as the War Department “mouthpiece” and “as the rubber stamp Uncle Tom who was used by the

War Department.” Still, with the support of most of the black press and the War Department, Gibson was very productive and was a key figure in 1944 and 1945 in the development of policies benefiting African Americans in military service.

In addition to the efforts of the McCloy Committee and the work of Truman Gibson, the War Department took other steps with regard to the employment of blacks. By mid-1943, it was clear to many high-ranking War Department officials that mounting racial problems were detrimental to military efficiency. In an attempt to ease these tensions, the War Department issued several important directives. These dealt with issues such as discrimination against blacks and the on-base use of recreational facilities. The recreational facilities directive provided that although facilities could be designated for particular units, they could not be denied to any group or individual because of race. The military was attempting to reduce friction in the civilian community by encouraging black soldiers to use facilities on the base. Civilian complaints were answered with a standard response that all soldiers regardless of race should “be afforded equal opportunity to enjoy the recreational facilities which are provided at posts, camps and stations.”

Another device employed by the War Department in an attempt to alleviate racial problems was to produce various items for public release directed at both white and black audiences. The pamphlet, *The Negroes and the War*, was clearly a propaganda attempt directed at African Americans, and was not one of the government’s more successful efforts. Blacks were critical because it lacked any admission that discrimination did exist in the United States and in the military, while southern whites concluded that it advocated social equality and was a political move to influence black voters. Representative Rankin of Mississippi called it a “Communist pamphlet,” and Representative Hamilton Fish of New York considered it to be “both tripe and baloney.”

“The Negro Soldier,” a film directed by Frank Capra and produced in 1943, was a more successful effort, and Capra designed it for both black and white audiences. In emphasizing the accomplishments and participation of blacks in American history, the film’s purpose was to educate whites and to build pride among blacks. The movie was shown in more than 3,500 commercial theaters, and the Chief of Staff required all soldiers to see it.

With similar purpose the War Department published guidelines to instruct those associated with black troops. The publications are significant because they represent a progressive and sensitive approach for the Army. *Command of Negro Troops* was issued as a guide for white officers commanding black troops. It pointed out that black facilities were rarely equal to whites, and noted that it was the commander’s responsibility to make them more equitable. *Leadership and the Negro Soldier* discussed the black role in America and the particular problems black soldiers



encountered in the Army. Army Talk Number 70 was an effort to educate whites on the danger of prejudice.

At the same time, the War Department made a significant attempt to be more constructive in its relationship with the black press by providing more news coverage of black units. The War Department corrected shortcomings by making more news available to black reporters, encouraging black papers to send war correspondents overseas, and holding frequent informal talks with editors. Thirteen black newspapers reached an agreement to pool the news gathered in two major theaters of operations. Gibson noted that this illustrated one of the few occasions where the "highly individualistic and exceedingly competitive Negro press has cooperated in a single venture."

Regardless of the good intentions of the War Department and its directives, memoranda, publications, and other materials, a change in attitude toward the utilization of African Americans could not be effective if AAF commanders lacked the moral leadership to enforce them. The AAF had hesitated in the employment of blacks, and there is little evidence that the AAF took the initiative to ensure equal treatment for them. Instead, it remained on the defensive in responding to pressure from the War Department. For example, in one case the War Department in May 1944 sent a memorandum to the AAF concerning the investigation of an aviation squadron, and noted that if the allegations were true, the service was "making themselves needlessly vulnerable by not placing more emphasis on the handling and training of Negro AAF units."

Subordinate generals frequently acted independently of War Department and AAF directives and orders. It is not wholly clear why many commanders refused to cooperate fully and why they willingly resisted these directives. One explanation generally given is the military's intrinsic conservatism that solidifies attitudes, discourages criticism, and restricts change. Often, ideas become molded into customs and traditions which are defended as sacred and vital to the efficient operation of a military unit. The traditional manner in which the military treated black soldiers was an established custom dating from before World War I and perpetuated during the Second World War. The AAF was therefore not innovative in its policy and did not acknowledge any contradiction between its treatment of blacks and the need to pursue a war. It is true that AAF policies reflected societal norms, but this service tended to represent the conservative branch of American society whose views it found were compatible with its own established thoughts. Further, a large proportion of generals and other officers were from the South, and they generally upheld this traditional attitude in race relations.

Directives, statements, and orders issued by the War Department were only as effective as the determination of local commanders to enforce them. Where local commanders were not positively committed, discrimination resulted. The Army attempted to regulate the assignment

of black military police and to encourage stationing northern African Americans in the North. It directed improvements in the caliber of white and black officers assigned to black units and issued instructions for leaders to avoid the use of racial epithets. It instructed local commanders about the necessity for proper recreational facilities for all black soldiers and appealed to southern state law enforcement officials and governors to respect them. Despite these efforts to contain racial problems, it was obvious that attitudes forged for centuries could not be changed overnight.

Perhaps commanders did realize that some men accountable for decision-making in the higher echelons of the War Department and AAF were not themselves totally committed to their racial policies. For example, General Barney Giles of the Air Staff had responded to the War Department that the AAF was properly handling and training black units. He probably based this remark on a letter that General Arnold had just issued to his commanders. General Arnold related that there was a feeling among some agencies in the War Department that the AAF was not complying with War Department policy concerning the handling of black troops. Arnold resolutely stated that War Department policy is AAF policy.

On the surface at least, this letter clearly demonstrated to the War Department that the AAF supported current policy. Yet, one week later a telephone conversation recorded between Giles and Major General Frank Hunter, First Air Force Commander, more clearly indicates the lack of commitment of high ranking officers:

Hunter: Well, Gen. Arnold wrote a letter down here the other day and said that we didn't carry out the War Dept. stuff and that we would.

Did you read that?

Giles: Yes, we were forced to do that.

Hunter: I know, I didn't pay much attention to it.

Giles: That's right.

Such nonchalance might well have been prevalent throughout the chain of command.

At lower command levels, there were noticeable contrasts in the instructions regarding the treatment of black enlisted men which some AAF commanders sent to their officers. A communication from the Commander of the Air Engineers emphasized building the "men's pride in themselves, their work, their officers, their organization." He made points that were basic principles of leadership, valuable for the command of all military personnel, and the Air Engineers did well to reemphasize them.

On the other hand, the Air Service Command in 1943 issued instructions on the same subject which, instead of emphasizing basic leadership principles, suggested taking advantage of what today would be called the "Sambo" personality of blacks. It noted that blacks are generally immature in every respect except their physical being, have a simple nature,

and if scared or frightened could react as a child. Instructions of this nature contributed to perpetuating stereotypes and were detrimental to positive race relations. There may have been other similar instructions, for Truman Gibson complained to Assistant Secretary McCloy that some directions proceeded on the premise that white officers should be "Bible spouting, fatherly masters who recognized the primitive and child-like qualities of their Negro soldiers." Gibson continued that this attitude was demeaning to black soldiers, assuming that if they were given "pretty uniforms, medals and pats on the back," they would perform to white expectations.

The War Department may have thought that solutions to racial problems were as easily dispensed as the directives and supportive measures it generated within the chain of command. However, much to the dismay of the department, the AAF, and the black community, racial problems persisted and even escalated throughout the last years of the war. In spite of efforts to deal with officer selection, discrimination, recreational facilities, and the black press, and the distribution of movies, manuals, and pamphlets, attitudes of commanders and white soldiers did not change overnight. Realistically, a War Department directive was only as effective as its enforcement within a chain of command, and in spite of noticeable changes in attitude within the War Department, there was a question as to the commitment of some AAF commanders to improve race relations.

By the end of the war, African Americans in the AAF were still not being treated in the same manner as whites, yet some progress had been made. Much of the credit for these successes must go to those blacks both within and outside of the military who were unwilling to accept discrimination of any kind and made a concerted effort to be conspicuous in combating unequal treatment. The Office of the Civilian Aide, the black press, and organizations such as the NAACP did support black soldiers. At times these groups were effective, at other times they were an annoyance to the War Department, but always, because of their influence among black soldiers and politicians, they were forces with which the War Department had to reckon.

## **Problems, Protests, and Leadership**

Racial protest intensified as the war progressed, and an increasingly larger number of people became involved in the fight for broader rights. In 1943, major race riots took place in the Army and in American cities. Critical disorders occurred at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi, Lake Charles, Louisiana, Camp San Luis Obispo, California, and Fort Bliss Texas; and civil disturbances took place in Los Angeles, Detroit, New York, and Beaumont, Texas.

Because African Americans in the AAF were not as numerous nor as concentrated as in the Army, smaller numbers partook in the AAF riots. Protests in the Army Air Forces covered the full spectrum from individual confrontations to small groups desegregating recreational facilities to spontaneous larger protests. In May and June of 1943, two significant AAF riots involved black soldiers: one at Bamber Bridge, England, and another at MacDill Field, Florida. These disturbances are important because they were a microcosm of the spontaneous 20th century race riot which confronted American cities in the postwar decades. An analysis of the Bamber Bridge riot shows how AAF leaders used the lessons learned from this confrontation to modify existing policies. However, later in the war another type of racial protest took place at Freeman Field, Indiana; well-planned and executed, it drew attention to the general failure of the AAF segregation policy toward black flying units and revealed the lack of commitment of some AAF leaders to implement War Department directives on racial matters.

Unfortunately, from a military point of view the employment of black soldiers was not a success. Black units reported low morale and were unable to perform satisfactorily. Black soldiers were often insulted and humiliated by those who expressed the traditional American, and particularly southern, practice of keeping them "in their place." Not only were discriminatory acts frequent, but they were defended as the custom in the South and in the military. More frustrating to blacks was the failure of whites to comprehend the magnitude of the racial problems in American civil and military society. From a military perspective, racial problems distracted soldiers' energies from the all-important war effort, and efficiency suffered as a result.

Black soldiers experienced many difficulties as victims of military and civil segregation. Four general problem areas are notable: trouble with the surrounding communities, mistreatment by military police, poor command leadership, and lack of adequate base and town recreational facilities.

In the local communities, the fact that African Americans wore the uniform as members of the Armed Forces did not alter the traditional racial attitude of whites. And to a large extent, the War Department and AAF did little to protect blacks. The vast majority of incidents that took

place in local communities ranging from harassment to violence and killings occurred in the South. Many of the incidents involved the southern transportation system, especially bus and rail facilities. Mistreatment by local police and authorities further caused major problems, and throughout the war, there are recorded numerous instances of police brutality. Police in Montgomery beat an Army nurse from Tuskegee Field when she refused to get off a bus as ordered by the driver, and a local sheriff in Ripley, Mississippi shot in cold blood a black soldier from Dyerburg Field.

African Americans experienced similar mistreatment in their encounters with the Military Police (MP). There were numerous reports of friction between them and black troops, notably during the early war years before the War Department established quality control over MP selection and training. Black soldiers feared and did not respect MPs, and provocation often led to violence.

A most exasperating problem confronting black units during the war was questionable leadership. Though blacks were segregated into their own units, the vast majority of their officers were white. The AAF did not utilize black officers on a large scale, and usually assigned most of them to flying bases. The War Department believed that they did not make good officers, that white officers did a better job of commanding black units, and that black soldiers actually preferred white officers over black ones. A corollary to this was the belief that black soldiers preferred southern white because they understood blacks and their problems.

Generally, white officers who were in command of blacks failed to understand or appreciate the particular problems they faced, and many of these officers were paternalistic, claiming that they liked and understood blacks and knew what was best for them. There were even reports of southern white officers attempting to enforce a type of Jim Crow system among units stationed in the North. Black soldiers were aware that at some bases the Army punished its white officers by assigning them to black units. The AAF and War Department were aware of the problem of leadership in black units and circulated a series of letters and corrective instructions.

Another grievance was the shortage of adequate recreational facilities, both on and off base. Bases were often located in areas where there were insufficient civilian facilities for black soldiers. Off-base facilities were limited and often there was only a small black support structure. On-base facilities posed another problem. In insisting on segregation, the AAF created a burden for its units. Not only were existing recreational facilities inadequate for all soldiers, but AAF commanders had to provide for two sets of each type of social activity. This practice became both burdensome and expensive, and strained the limited facilities to the detriment of both black and white morale. But even when AAF stations constructed facilities for blacks, they often did not meet the requirements of the "separate-but-equal" doctrine.

Generally, the experiences African Americans encountered in everyday service life strained their patience. During the war, the country asked them to risk their lives, while at the same time it imposed segregation as a constant reminder of their second-class citizenship. Black anger and frustration then were the inevitable consequence of this situation.

For whites in the AAF, black assertiveness was totally out of character and difficult to comprehend. Besides the confusion wrought by their rupture with their traditional role, blacks were clearly undermining the established social order. So whites sought easy explanations, usually blaming outside factors unrelated to the segregation issue itself. For example, southerners and those stationed in the South blamed northern blacks because the latter had more liberties in the North. In the North, southern blacks were held accountable for taking advantage of the increased freedoms available there. In both the North and South, whites regarded the Japanese, Communists, and the black press as the chief agitators.

Black AAF personnel focused their protests. They rebelled through their disinterest in the war and assigned mission; they engaged in acts of violence against individual whites; they insisted upon entering segregated facilities on and off base; they inundated everyone from the President to the Pittsburgh *Courier* with letters of protest; they undertook full-scale demonstrations; they spoke out against their officers and NCOs; and they exhibited an uncooperative and generally sullen attitude. For example, General B. O. Davis, Sr. and Truman Gibson, during a 1943 tour of Army camps, observed in most black soldiers a growing "implacable hatred for the Army." Much of that was due to the fact that blacks believed that they had nothing to fight for. Since most were in service units rather than in combat, the war for them seemed all the more remote.

Thus, the history of the African Americans in the AAF is a history of attacks on discrimination and segregation. Many outbursts were not premeditated, but rather were spontaneous, sparked by an isolated event that aroused black resentment. The image of blissful and dull blacks content with their status and of happy-go-lucky indifference find little support in the evidence. At March Field, California, four black soldiers damaged a restaurant where they had been refused service; on a bus from Daniel Field to Augusta, Georgia, soldiers threatened a bus driver who tried to get them to move; in Fairfax, South Carolina outside of Walterboro Field, 16 black officers shouted "Heil Hitler" when they were refused service at a "for-whites-only" cafe.

Frequently on AAF stations, recreational facilities became targets for integration. Incidents took place at Cochran and Robbins Fields, Georgia; Tuskegee Field; Gunter and Maxwell Fields, Alabama; George Field, Illinois; Laurinburg-Maxton Field, North Carolina; Hill Field, Utah; Langley Field, Virginia; and Gulfport, Mississippi.

There were a number of major race riots during the war, and the most notable in terms of its impact upon command policy occurred at

Bamber Bridge, England. The official report terms the riot an “alleged mutiny.” It was a reaction by a number of black soldiers to two white Military Policemen who accosted them for not wearing the proper uniform in a Bamber Bridge pub. Many of the black participants were tried and convicted for their involvement. What is significant about the incident is the manner in which high AAF leaders in Britain reacted to the riot and other racial incidents in 1943.

Racial problems in Great Britain were similar to those in the United States. Generally, friction developed over the use of recreational facilities, interracial dating, and the resistant attitude of some leaders which affected military justice and training. However, in Britain racial conditions were different. The absence of traditional restrictions and legal barriers for nonwhites meant that the local population afforded African



General Dwight D. Eisenhower chats with a black airman during a troop inspection.

Americans relatively fair treatment. This civil situation forced the American military to take a more progressive approach in handling the race question so as not to offend the British. In addition, there were a number of American generals who believed that all soldiers should be treated equally and translated that conviction into command policy. These included Generals Dwight Eisenhower, John Lee, Ira Eaker, and Carl Spaatz. They believed that blacks were an integral part of the war effort and that peaceful relations between the races were essential.

As African Americans started arriving in Britain, problems did develop and many of these can be attributed to misjudgment by the military. Training and organizational difficulties were compounded by a shortage of qualified officers to work with black units. By mid-1943 it appeared that the problem of race relations constituted a dilemma far out of proportion to the actual number of blacks stationed in Britain. But Bamber Bridge clearly brought the issue to the attention of all levels of command and forced a reevaluation of the role of the black in the Eighth Air Force. The official report enumerated the conditions responsible for the unhealthy racial climate and resultant friction. The report presented an accurate assessment of racial conditions and made recommendations that would affect every black AAF unit in Britain. Coming on top of Bamber Bridge was an incident at Ipswich where a number of white enlisted men displayed "a pugnacious attitude toward all colored soldiers, especially those seen in the company of white girls." Official documents blamed whites for being responsible in large part for the racial problems in the command as some of them were "trouble-makers."

The primary effort to solve racial problems originated at Eighth Air Force level with General Eaker who took the initiative to rectify the unhealthy situation. At a staff meeting, Eaker told his staff to "stop arguing as to the reasons why they [blacks] were sent here and do our best to cooperate with the War Department in making their employment here satisfactory to all concerned." Furthermore, he realized that "90 percent of the trouble with Negro troops was the fault of the whites" and directed his staff officers "to give serious thought to handling this important problem." This statement was almost without equal among AAF generals. In it there was no hedging, no avoidance, no complaining, but simply the commitment to stop wavering and get the job done.

As a result of his action, black units were reorganized into a Combat Support Wing and a group of seventy-five predominantly white officers were removed. The reorganization of African Americans into a combat support wing noticeably improved discipline, morale, and performance. Other measures also were taken: close liaison with district provost marshals, joint white and black MP patrols, the airing of justifiable grievances, careful selection of officers, and a well-rounded special services program. Importantly, the command learned that continuous preventive effort was needed to keep the lid on the racial situation.



What then can be concluded about the employment of African Americans in Great Britain during the war? They performed exclusively in a service capacity, and in addition to the normal strains of wartime, they had to endure a number of racial difficulties which affected their performance and morale. However, because of two factors problems caused by race were not as pronounced as in the United States. First, the British civilian population was more tolerant of blacks and did not object to socializing with them. Second, the military took a strong stand to keep discrimination at a minimum. The AAF made a determined effort and faced issues squarely, helping to minimize racial tension. For the most part, the main impetus was the desire of AAF leaders to create the most efficient fighting machine possible. In Great Britain, blacks performed efficiently because military leaders took their human needs into consideration.

Since black units in the United States were not under a single command as in Great Britain, there were wide differences in their treatment. Generally, the degree of racial harmony achieved was proportionate to leadership's sensitivity to racial problems, and to the way in which it followed War Department racial policies. As with Bamber Bridge, the MacDill race riot, also labeled a mutiny, took place because of leadership's failure to react decisively to escalating racial tensions. Several underlying factors were responsible for the unrest at MacDill. A large percentage of blacks were from the North, and they were mentally unprepared for southern racial discrimination; the transportation system to Tampa was inadequate; and officers assigned to black units were of low quality and ability. These problems were present at most bases where blacks were stationed, but at MacDill little attempt had been made to restrain the growing tension, and it only took a small incident to spark a major outbreak.

It should not be inferred that race relations were uniformly unpleasant throughout the AAF. Such an assumption would ignore those air bases where a responsive command attitude to racial problems did ease tensions considerably. At many bases race relations were at least good, and here black units performed in a satisfactory manner. Perhaps the single most important overriding factor was the attitude of the local commander and his staff. If he were positive toward black units and did everything within his power to prevent discrimination, the results were rewarding. Had this occurred more frequently, race relations within the entire AAF could have been much smoother, and black units could have been employed with better results. Inspection reports, unit histories, command histories, and other official documents attest to the presence of this positive racial climate at various bases.

The Second Air Forces appears to have had fewer racial problems than other commands; this may be attributed to the attitude of its commanding general., General St. Clair Streett. The command completed staff studies to determine how best to utilize blacks and recommended their utilization within their military occupational specialties. As a result



Gen. Streett

of this action, approximately 90 percent of the blacks were properly assigned. This assignment problem was a major source of irritation within other commands.

Within other commands, individual unit commanders could establish the pattern for improved communication between the races. Both Judge Hastie and Truman Gibson singled out the commanding officer at Patterson Field, Ohio for his determination to deal fairly with all personnel and prevent any kind of discrimination. Sheppard Field, Texas took special care to utilize each black soldier in accordance with his qualification. The handling of aviation squadrons at Eagle Pass Field, Texas and Barksdale Field, Louisiana received special comments from Gibson. The Barksdale unit history reported that the officers were always concerned for their men and were perceptive in dealing with their discipline, work, training, and recreation.

Douglas Field, Arizona made a special effort to ensure that black Women's Army Corps (WACs) personnel would be well accepted with a minimum of difficulty. Bases throughout the Eastern Technical Training Command introduced a number of measures that favorably affected morale, such as purchasing musical instruments, ensuring appropriate assignment of jobs commensurate with training, eliminating bed checks, and providing adequate recreational facilities.

The pattern of race relations adopted in a particular unit or within a command often related to the quality of leadership and command attitude. The War Department and Army Air Forces exerted considerable effort in seeking a solution to racial problems, and the most expedient course repeatedly proved to be the application of basic principles of constructive military leadership and a commitment to their departmental policies. Successful commanders were able to maintain discipline, while looking out for the welfare of their men and women. Unsuccessful leaders often

saw blacks as problems rather than as soldiers who could perform their mission given the proper training and support. But where African Americans were not treated fairly, they often resorted to some kind of protest. Thus, the degree to which officers at all levels of command were committed to the successful employment of blacks marked the difference between the success or failure of a black unit.

## Confrontation at Freeman Field

The history of the 477th Bombardment Group (Medium) is a story of failure, and it practically collapsed as a unit in the spring of 1945. This failure can be attributed to haphazard leadership that had a cursory regard for problems and often ignored War Department policies.

The 477th began its calamitous training at Selfridge Field, Michigan, but the unhealthy racial atmosphere created by the officers' club incident and the general friction that existed there soon stymied its training. The unit moved to Godman Field, Kentucky and then to Freeman Field, Indiana in an AAF attempt to isolate the racial problems rather than to seek solutions to them. The unit's performance was thus poor, and the training it received to qualify for combat duty was not commensurate with the expenditure in personnel, money, and material.

The 477th Group encountered a number of major difficulties which contributed to its ineffectiveness. First, although it was activated as a unit in January 1944, its manning was not completed until 1 March 1945. Second, the training was inefficiently scheduled, deadeningly repetitious, and frequently postponed. Third, because blacks were relatively new to flying, there was no established cadre to break in new pilots. Fourth, because of racial antagonisms, the white leadership of the group did not have the respect of the blacks in the unit. Fifth, the segregation issue tore the unit apart, the most conspicuous cause of racial tension being the segregation of officers' clubs.

As a result, hostility intensified between blacks and whites, deepening the cleavage between the black units and their command. The vertical relationship that exists between officers and enlisted men broke down into a horizontal relationship among all blacks. In addition, according to the First Air Force history, there was "the determination of negro officers to achieve social equality, the determination of the AAF to deny it, and the need of the War Department to tell both they were right."

The AAF failed to profit from its previous experiences with black flying units, and consequently manning and training problems plagued the 477th. Surpluses and shortages were common. Enlisted men arrived with little formal or on-the-job training. The group commander, Colonel Selway, tried to make the best of the situation by initiating an intensive training program, but the system became so complicated that simply maintaining records was an impossible task. When the AAF activated the 477th, the group was confronted with the immediate handicap of 60 pilots and copilots with no bombardier-navigators. A year later, and three months after their projected deployment date, the group was short 26 pilots, 43 copilots, 2 bombardier-navigators, and all 288 gunners. However, once the 477th was fully manned, the supply of men was endless and Godman became crowded. Because of these difficulties, the training of the unit took 15 months, five times the normally allotted time,

and there was still disorganization. Rather than focusing on combat readiness, the primary mission of the group deteriorated to satisfying training requirements. African Americans in the 477th knew that the AAF and First Air Force would sacrifice training to maintain segregation, and this knowledge undermined morale.

Another difficulty was that the AAF was overly cautious, since it conducted a training program not with combat in mind, but with an overwhelming preoccupation with public reaction. There had been charges at the beginning of the war that the AAF had been reckless with black lives. To counter this charge, First Air Force came up with an accident rate that was a matter for commendation and congratulations. However, the command accomplished this with a caution so excessive as “to amount to babying,” since the 477th conducted its training only under optimum conditions. The Air Inspector noted that although pilots held instrument cards, they could not fly under instrument conditions. An indication of the command’s attention to political pressure was a jocular comment found on a buckslip from the First Air Force Operations and Training Division. When the question arose of replacing white officers with black ones in early 1945, one officer noted that “maybe we should coordinate this with Eleanor [Roosevelt].”

Between May 1944 and June 1945, the 477th endured 38 squadron or base unit moves, 23 of them called Permanent Change of Station (PCS). It is true that other groups in the AAF endured similar inconveniences, but for the 477th the AAF precipitated each move not for military advantage, but racial reasons.

To illustrate, the 477th originally went to Selfridge because Tuskegee was overcrowded and nearby Detroit could provide suitable recreational facilities for blacks. But when urban tensions began to intensify and the AAF saw Detroit as a liability because of its “outside influence” and “racial agitators,” the group was relocated. However, official military reports record that the reasons for the move were adverse weather conditions and the hazards of industrial smoke. The transfer to the isolation of Godman may have resolved the racial problem, or at least postponed it, but from a military standpoint it was a poor place to train the group. The unit historian conducted a survey of the facilities at Selfridge, Godman, and Freeman Fields, and in terms of weather, terrain, housing, hanger space, runways, ramps, and training aids, Godman was the most unfavorable. Using Godman meant that a subbase was needed for night flying, and Sturgis was selected. But as the Group Commander Colonel Selway notes, this precipitated questions about eating and sleeping accommodations since “it always goes back to the same old racial thing. How can you do night flying without housing people, and if they are colored, commissioned and enlisted, what happens – they’ve got to eat and sleep.” By early 1945, the training schedule had become so bogged down, it was obvious that the 477th needed one base that could provide all of its

training needs to salvage the program – in March the group moved to Freeman Field, Indiana.

At Freeman Field, racial problems arose that were not factors at Godman. At Godman, African Americans had full use of the installation, including the officers' club and recreational facilities, while whites used the segregated facilities at nearby Fort Knox. Black officers endured this situation because they could not legally protest the segregated club at Fort Knox. AR 210-10 stated that everyone assigned to a base could use the facilities, but they were not assigned to Fort Knox and the regulation did not apply to them. The enlisted men from Godman, however, did challenge segregation at the Fort Knox theater. After the war when Colonel B. O. Davis, Jr. was the group commander and First Air Force inquired about the colonel living at Fort Knox, a post colonel replied that "We have four General Officers living here on the post, and by God, they just don't want a bunch of [racist epithet deleted] moving in next door to them."

At Godman and at Freeman, the AAF and First Air Force maintained a white power structure that permitted blacks to advance in rank only to a certain grade. The higher grades were reserved for white officers. Even blacks who had experienced overseas combat duty with the 332d were assigned as trainees under white supervisors. One black pilot in the 477th believed that this was the real issue underlying all racial problems and that the officers' club dispute was simply a means to bring the question into focus. This structure also applied to the enlisted men. Colonel Selway stated that the unit could not have black crew chiefs on airplanes; blacks could be mechanics, but all the crew chiefs had to be white.

As the white command structure of the 477th became more rigid in enforcing segregation, it became increasingly difficult to maintain standards of discipline. The climate became explosive, ready to be ignited, and the fuse was lit at Freeman Field following a series of incidents at the officers' club. The War Department intervened, assumed direct control of the situation, and forced First Air Force and the AAF to back down on the segregation issue.

After the 477th moved to Freeman Field, black officers were no longer allowed free reign of the base as they had enjoyed at Godman. There were two separate officers' clubs, and to skirt the August 1944 War Department directive prohibiting segregation in recreation facilities, the base designated one club for key supervisory officers and the other for trainees. This distinction took advantage of the loophole in the directive – facilities could be designated by unit or organization. This resulted in *de facto* segregation. On the other hand, Freeman Field completely disregarded AF 210-10 which held that all officers at a post had the right to membership in all clubs. From recordings of telephone conversations, it is clear that Colonel Selway, in separating the races, acted with the full

support and often with the encouragement of General Hunter who had the indorsement of the Air Staff.

Soon after arriving at Freeman, some skirmishes took place in Seymour and on base, and small groups of black officers time and again entered the white club. Selway wanted to close the white club, but Hunter advised Selway to remain firm; he would be "delighted for them to commit enough actions that that way [sic] so I can court-martial some of them." In early April, groups of black officers entered the white club and were arrested. All but three were released because the legal officer said that the order prohibiting their entry into the club was "inexact and ambiguous as to its meaning or purpose." The three were held because they had pushed an officer as they entered the club. Meanwhile, a new regulation was issued and all the officers had to sign a statement indicating that they did "read and fully understand the above order." One hundred and one black officers refused to sign; they were arrested and flown to Godman. The African Americans had remained abreast of all events, and played their hand carefully. Rather than congregate in large groups, they discussed their plans inconspicuously among themselves, and made certain that their protest was orderly and effective without violence.

Hunter continued to circumvent the race issue and mentioned to Selway that "as far as I'm concerned I don't recognize any race problem, I recognize a conspiracy to revolt, not to comply to military orders." In another conversation, to Selway's comment that, "If we run on this, we might as well quit," Hunter replied, "I know that. I don't run on anything. I have no idea of running." The Air Staff also supported General Hunter ("none of us can suggest any better procedure than that which you are following.").

However, several days later the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, Brigadier General Ray Owens, had the unpleasant task of informing Hunter that the 477th would be returned to Godman and that Selway would be replaced. This upset Hunter. He informed Selway of the move, but not of his impending dismissal. Selway reported to Hunter that "there would be no assimilation except over my dead body." Later, Owens reported to Hunter that "he [Arnold] said to tell General Hunter that we are perfectly pleased and happy and satisfied with the actions he took....The Chief [Arnold] here feels that his [Hunter's] action in the past was perfectly alright, legitimate, satisfied with it."

Meanwhile, First Air Force prepared charges against the arrested officers. General Hunter tried to get an indorsement in writing from the AAF, supporting him on his interpretation of the club issue. He received verbal confirmation, but nothing in writing. Hunter plaintively noted to the Air Judge Advocate that "it leaves me out on the limb. I carry out instructions from the AAF, then I try to get it in writing, and I can't." Other conversations show the attitudes of some on the senior staffs. One Air Staff officer commented to another officer at First Air Force that "I have maintained all along that it's the whites that are being discriminated

against in the Army and not the colored.” He added that “maybe we can eliminate the program gradually and accomplish our end.”

Finally, on 20 April, the Air Staff notified Hunter that General Marshall had approved the release of the 101 officers and that charges against them will be dropped; they would only receive an administrative reprimand. This action effectively removed Hunter’s authority from the matter, since he had jurisdiction over the 477th, and he complained accordingly; he had “court-martial jurisdiction, and they cannot tell me whom I can try and whom I can’t.” Of course, Hunter had to back down, although he did get Selway to remain in command of the 477th to avoid giving the blacks the idea that they had “got another one.” The official War Department position was that “there is reasonable doubt that these officers fully understood the implications of their actions.” Of course they did, and they were willing to accept the consequences of their actions.

We know from the documentation that the McCloy Committee had followed the events at Freeman Field and has assumed almost complete control of the matter. The committee was aware of the widespread publicity given to this issue and of the political pressures on the War Department. Many Senators and Representatives wrote indicating their concern for the situation. The committee concluded that although the arrests were proper, the order separating the races was not, and the committee opposed the official AAF position which was to modify the regulation. Secretary of War Stimson supported the committee and asserted that there could be separation in the use of facilities, but that separation should not be based on race.



Lt. Gen. Ira Eaker addresses the 332d Fighter Group at Godman Field. Brig. Gen. B.O. Davis, Sr. and Civilian Aide Truman Gibson look on.



Of the three who remained under arrest, the court martial only found one guilty and he was fined \$150. In essence, while the AAF charged 104 black officers with a capital offense in time of war, it succeeded in convicting only one. The African Americans tested the segregation system and disobeyed orders, but because their demonstration was well planned and executed, and because outside pressure had mounted in their favor, they were able to force the AAF to abide by War Department directives.

On the other hand, some might argue that the AAF had won the battle because it transferred the 477th to an inferior base – Godman – where segregation could be enforced. Colonel Davis and his black officers and enlisted men replaced the entire white command structure on the base. The AAF thus created an all-black base. But blacks did achieve certain gains – an opportunity to advance up the command ladder and perform tasks for which they were qualified. They started their training for the Pacific war, but the war ended before they were given that opportunity.

This detailed study of the 477th Bombardment Group illustrates how command attitudes and leadership influenced or undermined racial harmony. Some commanders did take an active role in assuring the acceptance of African Americans; others simply paid lip-service to War Department directives and principles of leadership. In the case of the 477th, blacks were seen as problems, and AAF leadership utilized the unit to satisfy political pressure rather than to focus on its potential with regard to the war.

## Conclusion

There is no question that during World War II, the Army Air Forces made some headway toward improved race relations and the proper utilization of black units. However, that partial success does not alter the fact that the AAF failed to develop a comprehensive policy for dealing with all the problems that arose following the introduction of large numbers of black soldiers. By 1942, the AAF was required to accept and utilize African Americans at a rate of 10.6 percent of its total force, and unfortunately, it did not anticipate many of the resultant problems. The War Department and AAF operated under the official policy of segregation in terms of housing, messing, and recreation; since they considered these facilities "separate-but-equal," they did not find their policy discriminatory. Unfortunately, the system reflected the racist tradition of American society, and despite sincere and whole-hearted efforts by some commanders, in actual practice the military did not grant blacks equal treatment. As a result, from the perspective of the black soldier, segregation was unacceptable, and from the perspective of the AAF, it was inefficient.

Significantly, as the war progressed, blacks saw the value of protest to effect change. Had the black community not been as alert, organized, and vigorous in its demands, they would not have participated in the AAF to the extent they did. They persistently objected to their status, beginning with a campaign to reverse the exclusion policy of the Air Corps. Throughout the war, the black community actively fought segregation and discrimination and demanded maximum participation within the military. This constant pressure forced the War Department to expand opportunities for blacks and, in turn, to influence the AAF to reevaluate and modify its policies to accommodate black demands. This process of demand, pressure, and protest leading to reevaluation and change dominated the war years. To illustrate, from the early days of Tuskegee, pressure from the black community resulted in the AAF making available to blacks new technical areas, permitting them to fly twin-engine aircraft, sending them overseas in increasing numbers, and providing better base facilities. Furthermore, persistent political pressure provided an opportunity to participate in combat operations even though many AAF leaders questioned this policy.

Since many AAF commanders were not totally committed to the utilization of black personnel, they may have become indifferent toward carrying out War Department directives. It follows that the degree of racial harmony attained was relative to the quality of leadership which fluctuated from command to command. For example, progressive leadership in Great Britain used the lessons it learned from the Bamber Bridge riot in effecting a more equitable policy, while the lethargy of other leaders was responsible for the near collapse of the 477th as a unit. The dis-

aster at Freeman Field demonstrated the failure of the AAF and its policies, and its insensitivity to the grievances that precipitated the incident. AAF commanders continued to resist the full implementation of War Department racial policies even after 1943 when they evolved into a more positive approach.

Finally, out of the war the AAF emerged with ambiguous ideas on the future employment of blacks, reflecting the confused policies and practices that had existed during the war. Some leaders attempted to retreat to a policy of total segregation, while others realized that some aspects of segregation were no longer applicable. Ultimately, to be successful in achieving racial harmony, the AAF had to develop a policy that would provide for the equal treatment of all personnel within the service and had actively to enforce that policy.

Perhaps the best summary to come out of the war on the impact of race relations on unit efficiency came from Colonel Noel Parrish, the Tuskegee commander. He commented on the black flying units, but his observations could apply to all black units:

The fact that they could operate with the background they had, the conditions they were under, the suspicions as well as the real fears that they would not be given equal opportunity or recognition or treatment, and the question of precisely what they were fighting for, which was bound to arise – considering all these things I thought they did better than anyone had a right to expect. But I don't want to pretend that this was the greatest and most effective unit ever produced. It was amazing that it performed at all.

In summary, the struggle to improve race relations in the AAF during World War II challenged the military establishment to face its own ineffectiveness. Through confrontation with black and white liberal groups, the AAF learned that active commitment, vital leadership, and equal opportunity produced a more viable military organization than did segregation and unequal treatment. A lesson to be learned is that it is necessary to change behavioral patterns, because attitudes entrenched for 300 years cannot be easily recast. If the United States Air Force and the Department of Defense continually apply the notions of efficiency and social justice implicit in the World War II experience, the military will be able to move ahead of society in solving America's race relations problems.

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